

## Background

The Australian Government's Seasonal Worker Program (SWP) commenced in 2012, and builds on the Pacific Seasonal Worker Pilot. The SWP aims to contribute to the economic development of the 'sending' countries in the Pacific region and meet seasonal Australian labour shortages. Workers from eight Pacific island countries—Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu—and Timor-Leste are eligible to participate in the scheme. Currently, the scheme is limited to the horticulture sector, but is being trialled in the accommodation, aquaculture, cotton and cane sectors.

In July 2012, the State, Society and Governance in Melanesia program was commissioned by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship to develop a Cultural Awareness Training package to deliver to Australian stakeholders of the SWP. The rationale for the training was multi-dimensional. Benefits from increased cultural awareness include:

- strengthening SWP integrity and reputation
- more fruitful employer-employee relationships
- increased productivity through better cross-cultural communication
- worker compliance with employment and visa regulations.
- reduced workplace conflict by improving employee morale
- greater local community acceptance and integration of seasonal workers.

## Cultural Awareness Training

The overarching objective of the Cultural Awareness Training was to raise awareness of Pacific islands and Timor-Leste cultural norms and values to an audience of SWP stakeholders (particularly approved employers). Research has highlighted managers and employers who have undergone cross-cultural training and are aware of cultural differences are able to manage their workers more

effectively in order to maximise productivity and efficiency (Johnson, Lenartowicz & Apud 2006). We took the approach that cross-cultural efficiency can build effective employer-employee relationships and thereby improve productivity and efficiency.

To aid in the design and delivery of the training, telephone interviews were conducted with approved employers who had taken part in the pilot program. Approved employers were asked questions on their relationship with employees, pastoral care for workers, cross-cultural communication styles and issues, and their overall views and perceptions of the program. Key factors that may influence working relationships and strategies to deal with different communicative styles of Pacific islands and Timor-Leste employees were identified from the interviews and a literature review on cross-cultural awareness and management. The interview findings demonstrated that by gaining a better appreciation of the diverse cultures and communicative styles of sending countries, stakeholders would be able to communicate more effectively with their workers and manage cross-cultural issues and barriers that may arise. In return, intercultural communication will improve worker satisfaction and aid in minimising workplace conflict. The training comprised four components:

- Pacific Islands and Timor-Leste values and cultures
- cross-cultural communication
- managing conflict in the workplace
- scenarios and role-play.

The training was delivered first to an audience of approved employers, then in truncated form to a larger audience at the Inaugural Conference of the Seasonal Worker Program on 31 July 2012. Evaluation for the training was highly positive with respondents stating that the content was useful and relevant, that presenters were competent with the content, and that they would recommend the training to other approved employers.

## A Case for Culture

The Cultural Awareness Training package aimed to promote greater respect, understanding and acceptance of cultural traits and social norms of Pacific islanders and East Timorese among Australian stakeholders. In particular, it sought to dispel preconceptions and stereotypes of other cultures, while providing strategies to reduce the likelihood of cross-cultural miscommunication.

Current Australian research on the pilot SWP scheme supports previous international research by showing that both employers and employees identify cross-cultural communication as a key issue to the success of the SWP (Roorda, 2012). At the Inaugural Conference of the Seasonal Worker Program, Timor-Leste's labour attaché highlighted the need for Australian employers to have some awareness of the cultural backgrounds of workers they employ, particularly for those that have come through the SWP (da Silva, 2012). Although Pacific and East Timorese workers are required to undertake lengthy inductions and training on Australian culture before beginning their employment in Australia, there is no such requirement or training for approved employers to undertake cultural awareness training. Hence the training is one avenue to address this gap and need.

Being aware of cultural differences and being able to manage and negotiate cross-cultural issues has social and economic benefits for both Australian employers and Pacific Island and East Timorese employees. There is evidence that seasonal workers who are culturally adaptive have been successful in participating in New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer Scheme (Cameron 2011). A case can be made that Australian employers who have cross-cultural knowledge and skills gained from the training can build harmonious and productive working relationships with seasonal workers, thereby leading to improved worker productivity and wellbeing, and longer term circulation of a reliable workforce.

The SWP emphasises potential development gains in participating countries through seasonal workers' remittances and transferral of skills whilst addressing labour shortages in Australian industries. Given that the program is meant to be mutually beneficial for both parties, compulsory cultural awareness training for Australian stakeholders on the diverse cultural settings, work ethics, and development contexts in the Pacific and Timor-Leste has the potential to build equitable development partnerships with participating countries.

## References

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